

Juan-Si's America: Stripping Politics of Its 'Schmaltz'

Everybody has their own America, and then they have the pieces of a fantasy America that they think is out there, but they can't see ... And you live in your dream America that you've custom-made from art and schmaltz and emotions just as much as you live in your real one.

—Andy Warhol, *America*, 1985.

For about two decades, the American Midwest has been Juan-Si's playground. After living in two of the East Coast's most flamboyant cities, Miami and New York, he relocated at the hinge of the century to the deepest heartland, moving to Ohio, a state that is America in a nutshell, arguably the natural barometer and bellwether of US politics.¹

This change of scenery, which thrust him into another layer of inculturation, allowed Juan-Si to discover a fresh socio-political laboratory to carry out his detailed fieldwork. Always a stranger in a strange land, "a perpetual dissident in his pilgrimage, an inconvenient guest even in his homeland,"² Juan-Si manages to not to lose himself while mutating in a chameleonic way into an artist who belongs to this new context, not as a passive witness or as a critical tourist but as a protagonist fully involved in a subtle and incisive way with shaping the American socio-political reality. Since relocating, he has traveled extensively, documenting his surroundings and capturing these eerie landscapes "as illustrations of a psychological and cultural geography ... a social imaginary encrypted within a particular place."³

American Playground 2008/2018 shows a selection of 'still frames' of his travels— or is it more akin to an intimate road movie? —a visual docudrama of abandoned places, symmetrical buildings, ideologically charged billboards, cultural haikus, rural capitalism, and a daily evangelical pragmatism of uncanny beauty. This series comes a decade after "Mental Landscapes," his installation exhibition with his wife and collaborator Paloma Dallas at Olin Art Gallery at Kenyon College, which summoned up an early sample of this wondrous alter reality, more real than reality itself in these times of political uncertainty.

There is a vintage quality to these pieces that is a sign of immanence, the quality of an image that does not fall into the ordinary time-space relationship, a space cropped and desynchronized to contain all the contradictions of a micro-universe.

¹ The Encyclopædia Britannica entry highlights the fact that Ohio "reflects the urbanized, industrialized, and ethnically mixed United States that developed from an earlier agrarian period. The pattern of its life is so representative of the country as a whole that it is often used to test attitudes, ideas, and commercial products. Significantly, Ohio has supplied by birth or residence eight U.S. presidents".

² Badajoz, Joaquin. *The perpetual dissidence*. On *Mental Landscapes: Juan-Si Gonzalez & Paloma Dallas*. Olin Art Gallery at Kenyon College, 2009.

³ Gonzalez, Juan-Si. Artist statement. *American Playgrounds & Model Homes, The works of Juan-Si González and Da'Shaunae Jackson*. Cleveland Print Room, Cleveland, Ohio, 2020.

From the dislocation of identity to what Martin Heidegger⁴ (2001:175) called “the nature of nearness,” Juan-Si reassigns meanings to his surroundings after a mental process of thingification.

By “reframing and editing,” Juan-Si turns these surroundings into “fictions of themselves, metaphors of this mental landscape that translate [his] solitude within this vast territory in which [he] continues to be a stranger,”⁵³ exposing and creating—in his singular aesthetic style—a puritan surreal vision of the United States that is inherent to the literary and visual artwork of some of the titans of American culture. Digging deep into the often-invisible soul of an underground America, on which is laid the real foundation of a country that at a superficial level seems a mosaic of cultures and immigrations, Juan-Si builds up the suspense required for bystanders to be absorbed into his visual plot.

It has been a long Odyssey for the Cuban-American artist transmogrified into another Ohioan. Juan-Si has gone from creating more interactive and performative art during the 80’s as a founding member of the collective Art-De —a group that pioneered political performance in Cuba and what was later known as activism and whose name stands for Art+Rights, a volatile combination that in Cuban vernacular Spanish sounds like “arde” (burn)—to creating a much more isolated and subtle form of political commentary. This skeptic of the epic Cuban revolutionary narrative isn’t easily seduced by political mirages or nostalgia. He stays alert in a sort of paranoid antiestablishment fashion that continuously renders high-carat conceptual art.

Always at a crossroads, literally and metaphorically, despite the “anxiety [that] limits [his] ability to travel—but don't tell [his] mom,” Juan-Si’s hyperkinetic creative production has explored all realms. Long praised as a conceptual artist, what sets him apart is his understanding of what the great Georgia O’Keefe once said: “the world is big far beyond my understanding—to understand maybe by trying to put it into form.”

Playing to express ideas through shapes and discovering hidden messages behind forms, Juan-Si has charted a trajectory most artists only can dream of. Resilient, versatile, and ambitious, he strips the ordinary of its visual nostalgia. With an imagery that is mutable but still recognizable, he permeates his environments with a surreal eeriness —not unlike when he walked naked in a cloud of bus exhaust in the Havana of the eighties —that makes us wonder if we are just fooled into believing that he is portraying the magic of reality or if the real world is instead just mirroring his wondrous imagination.

Joaquin Badajoz

In Hell’s Kitchen, (Wo)Manhattan, Dec 8. 2019.

□ American Playgrounds, Ohio, 2008-2018

(anxiety limits my ability to travel, but don't tell my mom)

⁴ Heidegger, Martin. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Translated by Albert Hofstadter. Harper Perennial Modern Classic, New York, 2001.

⁵ Heidegger, Martin. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Translated by Albert Hofstadter. Harper Perennial Modern Classic, New York, 2001.

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